Healing the Masses

Julie Feinsilver tells the story of Fidel Castro's revolutionary priorities, and provides a possible explanation for the long reign of communism in Cuba. Until the recent strengthening of the embargo, Cuba had a health care system that rivaled those of most first world countries; health care assistance was used the way first world countries use foreign aid, to gain prestige and goodwill in the international arena. In light of the ongoing debate about the health crisis in the United States, *Healing the Masses* is a timely book about the politics of health care. —Sharon Hennessey

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Since family doctors are trained in social and comprehensive general medicine, they focus on both cure and prevention. The latter includes health education to alter unhealthy lifestyle practices such as sedentarism, smoking, and poor nutrition resulting from traditionally unhealthy food preferences. One of the tasks of the family doctors is to organize exercise classes for adults, particularly the elderly. Every weekday morning at 8:00 A.M., one can see numerous senior citizens exercising in the parks, plazas, and other open spaces of Cuba. For the elderly, Cuban doctors claim, this daily exercise routine has resulted in decreased illness, less medication, and better psychological health because of their renewed interaction with others.

The family doctor and nurse also provide daily care to the elderly and to patients who are chronically ill, recovering from operations, or suffering from acute episodic illness that might previously have required hospitalization. Castro has suggested that this policy will make every bed in Cuba a hospital bed. This care may be excessive, but it provides a sense of security for the patients as well as their families.

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World-class Cuban orthopedic surgical advances include revascularization of the spinal cord (1990), which in 1993 was still performed only on an experimental basis in the United States, and very advanced experimental

microsurgery to graft nerve tissue to the spinal cord in cases where the spinal cord had been severed. Rehabilitation services are highly advanced, particularly at the Frank País Orthopedic Hospital in Havana, where many war casualties from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and the former Soviet Union have been treated. The external fixator (RALCA), developed by Dr. Rodrigo Alvarez Cambras, has been used to treat hip fractures in the elderly, allowing them to walk again within six days of application of the device.

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Whether Cuba can be considered a world medical power is ultimately less important than the symbolic capital Cuba accumulates in the process of aspiring to that status. By heralding its own work and making it available and visible to those from other developing countries and international organizations, Cuba is determining the health agenda for many who look to it for leadership precisely because of its achievements. By naming and defining its social world (to recall Bourdieu's terms), Cuba is setting the standards by which it wants to be judged.